

Las Vegas' Roman empires

Margaret Malamud

When Caesars Palace opened on August 5, 1966, it set a new standard of luxury for the Nevada casino-resort industry. The owner and chief designer, Jay Sarno, tired of Wild West themes, went for 'a little true opulence' in the form of a recreation of the Roman Empire in the age of the Caesars. A Las Vegas newspaper trumpeted its opening with the headline: 'Golden Age Returns: Roman Empire Reborn in Las Vegas' and the three-day grand opening established a mood of excess and extravagant consumption. Over a thousand guests were invited to the grand opening at which fifty-thousand glasses of champagne were poured and the largest order of Ukrainian caviar ever delivered to a single party eaten. In the Caesars Forum Casino guests gambled and were served free cocktails by employees dressed as gladiators and goddesses, they drank and danced at Cleopatra's Barge Nightclub, a floating cocktail lounge and disco in the shape of an Egyptian ship afloat in a miniature Mediterranean Sea, and they lounged by a marble pool in the shape of a Roman shield in the landscaped 'Garden of the Gods'. Singer Andy Williams opened the show at the Circus Maximus Supper Club, with its booths in the shape of Roman chariots and walls decorated with Roman shields. Heralded by eight Roman soldiers, the curtains parted to reveal 'Rome Swings', a stage full of swinging, gyrating Cleopatras. Many visitors in the late 1960s might well have shared the sentiments of the New Yorker columnist who attended the spectacular opening: 'We think of Nero in Hades, shaking his head in wonder and envy. Rome - his Rome, which he rebuilt with broad streets and splendid villas - was never a patch on Vegas' (*New Yorker*, 20 August, 1966, 26).

The architecture and design of the original Caesars Palace play with and profit from a long-established tradition in American architecture of using monumental Roman architecture to signify grandeur and civic magnificence. Whereas monumental Roman architecture was used in civic buildings to express the nobility of American public life, at the casino Roman references are deployed to signify the pleasures and benefits of imperial power and plenty. More importantly, Caesars capitalizes on the cultural force of the myth of a decadent and opulent Rome, a myth the Hollywood film industry helped disseminate into American popular culture. The casino's visual representations of Rome were largely inspired by the cinematic Rome of Hollywood. Beginning with Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (1926) and Cecil B. DeMille's *Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Cleopatra* (1934) and lasting through such later 'sword-and-sandal' epics as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Cleopatra* (1963), these films depicted lavish displays of wealth, decadence, and consumption in imperial Rome. While Hollywood's earliest recreations of the Roman world had pitted decadent Romans (the Outsiders) against virtuous Christians (Americans), it was in the boom-time prosperity of the 1960s with its loosening of restraint in the pursuit of self-gratification that Hollywood invoked Rome to signify and celebrate the pleasures of excess and indulgence.

The interior of Caesars Palace is like a pastiche of film sets from Hollywood epics set in imperial Rome: sumptuous black and red Italian marble columns trimmed with gold leaf ring the casino; classical statuary and marble friezes depicting scenes from Roman history adorn the walls (Roman military conquests and women as booty are frequent motifs); guests are served cocktails by gladiators and goddesses; and at the Bacchanal Restaurant patrons are greeted by Caesar and Cleopatra (whose

costumes are a fusion of Hollywood spectacular and Las Vegas showtime) to enjoy a Roman 'orgy' served by centurions and wine goddesses.

Caesars does not make a serious attempt to replicate the real ancient Rome: instead it celebrates its playfulness and cinematic outrageousness. Guests were meant to feel that they had passed through to the other side of the movie screen, and they were encouraged to emulate the behavior of decadent Romans and the Hollywood stars who played them. Owner Jay Sarno claimed he wanted every guest to feel like a Caesar (or a Cleopatra). This, in fact, is the reason why there is no apostrophe in Caesars. He believed the possessive would signify a place for only one Caesar, whereas he wanted every visitor to feel sovereign: 'It's not a place of one Caesar. It's a palace for all the Caesars, and a palace for all people. We wanted to create the feeling that *everybody* in the hotel was a Caesar.'

Caesars neatly encompasses and capitalizes on a key tension in American society between the egalitarian ideals of democracy and the fact of economic difference. Jay Sarno's populist rhetoric ('Everybody is a Caesar') speaks to one version of the American Dream: it offers each guest the chance to transcend economic constraints and social barriers; and to enter a world that promises glamour, wealth, power and the fulfillment of desire. Caesars also capitalizes on what could be called 'fantasies of utopian abundance': namely, the desire for freedom from the obligation to work, for effortless plenty, and for transformation through consumption. All are made to seem accessible to the privileged guests of the casino-resort. Such a promotion and promise of opulence and luxury encourages visitors to spend, and lose, their money. The obliteration of reality makes losing money pleasurable.

The Forum Shops, 1992

On May 1, 1992, the Forum Shops, a Roman themed shopping mall opened on the Strip in Las Vegas. Its financial backers commissioned the design of an upmarket shopping centre as a recreation of ancient downtown Rome. The result is an interior space which sets approximately 70 luxury shops and restaurants in a context of Roman facades and streetscapes, under an ever-changing Mediterranean sky where light changes in the course of an hour and a half from dawn to night skies.

At the Forum Shops imperial Rome provides a themed urban landscape for consumerism; the Forum serves as a showcase for commodities. The Forum Shops juxtaposes popular and high culture images of antiquity: monumental Roman architecture is used to evoke solidity, grandeur, tradition and civic magnificence, while a post DeMille style of cinematic spectacle and Disney inspired entertainment shape the mall's representations of Rome. Capitalistic enterprise and the pleasures of conspicuous consumption are given a legitimating veneer of classical culture.

The journey to ancient Rome begins from the Quadriga statue street entrance on the Las Vegas Strip which leads visitors directly into the simulated civic centre of classical Rome. The Quadriga statue – four gold-leaf horses and a charioteer – beckons visitors through a series of consecutive triumphal arches of increasing scale, encapsulating the ongoing process of Roman conquest, and at the same time psychologically preparing the visitor for the conquests to be achieved at the Gucci and Dior

shops – and at the slot machines and crap tables. Once inside, shoppers soon come upon the Festival Fountain Plaza, where they are entertained by statues of the Roman gods Bacchus, Venus, Pluto, and Apollo (the gods of Wine, Love, Wealth, and Music), who give a seven-minute special-effects filled performance every hour. The effects include music, audio animatronics, lasers, scenic projections on the domed ceiling, theatrical lighting, and computer controlled waterscape effects. When Bacchus speaks, already slightly drunk, he urges visitors to indulge and consume, and consumption, of course, is the point of the elaborate simulation and display of the Forum Shops.

The ‘centre of town’ is the Fountain of the Gods piazza, which has a huge fountain with statues and cascading waterfalls and a Temple of Neptune. In this expensive part of town, visitors can shop at Louis Vuitton (its roof-top adorned with statues of Roman senators) or at Gucci (housed in a temple with a statue of the goddess Minerva on top). The ‘finale’ is the Fortuna Terrace and Rotunda. Visitors pass by a number of expensive stores, including the Christian Dior shop (also housed in a temple) on their way to the Terrace. At the Terrace, the goddess Fortuna rises 25 feet from a marble platform surrounded by pillars of coloured marble and recessed arches that contain reproductions of classical statuary. The journey ends when participants pass through triumphal arches into the Caesars Palace casinos and resort.

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Despite commonalities, there are significant differences in the Rome constructed at Caesars Palace and the Rome fabricated at the Forum Shops. The Forum Shops offers a tasteful and sterile vision of imperial Roman and American affluence. Whereas the thematics of the 1966 Caesars Palace refer to exploitation and oppression and exploit the myth of a hedonistic and decadent Rome, the simulated civic centre invokes an elegant and opulent Rome where shopping becomes an edifying ‘cultural’ activity. In contrast to the overt eroticism and titillating cruelty that characterizes the design of the Caesars Palace casino – with its friezes of rapine and conquest and costumed servers standing in as slaves (in the 1960’s, the scantily clad cocktail goddesses were instructed to say ‘I am your slave’ and respond to drink orders with ‘Yes, master’) – the Forum Shops’ piazzas, fountains, designer shops and upmarket restaurants clad in Roman dress conjure up an orderly, refined, harmonious urban world. There are no masters and slaves here, and no hint of sexual violence or exploitation. Instead, patrons and spectators at the Forum Shops encounter a Rome that mirrors the values, aspirations, and lifestyles of wealthy elites in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

At the same time, the American investors, designers, and builders of Las Vegas’ empire in the sands are implicitly associated both with the ancient Romans who constructed edifices like the Colosseum, and, more fantastically, with the spectacular sets of Hollywood’s Rome. Architecture and interior design engage all five senses; the visitor is not simply a spectator but a participant in these projections of imperial Rome. In Las Vegas, the typical association of imperial Rome with luxury and decadence translates into a particular economy of spending. Fully immersed in sights, sounds, and sensations, the patron participates in Roman conquest and luxury by spending money in the casino, hotel, and shopping mall. The Rome that Las Vegas has built and continues to renovate is a monument to itself: to the magic of the entertainment industry and American capitalistic enterprise, and to feats of production presumed to be possible nowhere else. In Las Vegas there is no sign of a decline of either the Roman or the American empires.

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popular culture.

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